

The Fortress of Darkness Book Excerpt

Chapter 1 Continued

The two of them leaned low against their steeds' muscular necks, daring to glance backward at their pursuers for seconds at a time. Their swift horses increased their lead, their lengthy strides bringing them closer and closer to the edge of the town. Shops and storefronts blurred together as they sped by; people stared, some shouted encouragement to the men chasing them. A few blocks separated them from the open plains and freedom. A movement in between the alleyways caught August's attention. He focused on the next side street as they rode by it then cursed under his breath.

“Clay! They're going to try and cut us off up ahead!”

“Keep riding!”

They let go of the reins and pulled out their weapons; their knees gripping their mounts. The well-trained horses acknowledged their masters' shifting in the saddle, lowering their heads even more and increasing their speed. They approached the last of the buildings and saw the two bands of men converge on them. The leading riders attempted to stop the fleeing pair and immediately regretted their decision. August swung at his attackers with the razor sharp blades of his swords, slicing through flesh and bone with minimal effort. Clay checked a blow from a third assailant with a pair of daggers then stabbed the man's shoulder. Blood gushed from the deep wound and the attacker fell from his horse onto the rocky ground. Clay and August spurred their horses onward, rushing out onto the plains and toward the Great White Desert shimmering brightly on the horizon.

They reined in their steeds about an hour later, after having put many miles between themselves and the outpost. They sought shelter from the afternoon heat beneath a clump of broad-leaved trees, a cool stream winding near their roots. They rubbed down the horses then let them graze freely on the thick grasses. The friends sat down close to the edge of the copse, keeping an eye out for any signs of danger. Clay studied his lifelong friend, noting the lines of uneasiness visible on his face. The blatant killing of elves and Calla's willingness to turn them in made both of them even more apprehensive.

“What happened while I was gone?” Clay rested his arms on one knee, his brow furrowed in concentration.

“Several unpleasant situations,” August replied, plucking blades of grass from the ground.

“Tell me.”

“Four elves have been found in this area and all of them have been slain. No one knows why they have ventured to this part of the land but then again no one bothered to

ask them, either. I've seen the Dark Clan in the desert riding at night on top of the dunes. And..." He hesitated.

"And what?" Clay gently urged him, wiping away the perspiration on his forehead. The Dark Clan kept to themselves, yet he did not doubt that August had seen something in the darkness.

"I've seen a hooded and cloaked figure standing motionless near the edge of the desert. I remember one very quiet night in particular. The full moon illuminated the shape and I watched as it fell to its knees and dropped its head to its chest. I could have sworn I heard it...weep."

"A woman?"

"Perhaps, it was hard to tell."

Clay thought about the dream infiltrating his sleep of late, the vague image confusing no matter how many times he saw it. He dreamt of a cottage surrounded by trees, brush and thorns; the porch sagged, the steps splintered and rotten. Branches had broken through the windows; the once white paint had peeled away revealing weather beaten gray planks. Something indistinguishable moved within the decaying cabin, taunting him with its obscurity.

"What do you suggest we do, Augie?"

"We can't go back to the harbor and it'll only be a matter of time before Kepracarn hears about us. Now might be a good time to look into your roots."

"What makes you think the elves will welcome us?"

"Your pretty ears?"

"Very funny," he replied throwing a clump of dirt at his friend.

"What's the worst that can happen? They slam the door in our faces?"

"I guess we could get close enough to check things out."

"It's settled, then. We'll journey north of Kepracarn then follow the forest eastward."

They mounted up and headed north, careful to avoid the clusters of farms bordering Kepracarn to the west. Their path brought them to the edge of the desert, the setting sun transforming the sands from white into yellows then reds. The wind began to blow across the dunes, sending gyrating columns of sand into the deepening night sky. The hues took on shades of purples and blues the darker it became then, as the last of the

light retreated, left a sea of silver in its wake. The swollen moon hung so low on the horizon Clay thought he could reach up and touch it.

Clay and August removed the saddles and bridles and let the horses loose. The animals never ventured far. Clay stared at the majestic pair, recalling the first time he had seen them. He and August had been walking not too far from their present location when they had spotted the pair of horses off in the distance. They had thought about trying to capture them then laughed at themselves for even thinking about attempting such a daunting task. They walked on and noticed the animals were paralleling their course, moving closer and closer toward them. Intrigued by their strange action, the friends stopped and watched the horses shake their heads and nuzzle each other as if in conversation. They were transfixed, unable to move as the animals trotted over to them, each horse seeming to choose one of the men. The mare grabbed Clay's cap and cantered off a few paces, daring him to chase her. He called her 'Essa' after the blue-black, velvety flowers on the island. August named the stallion 'Tauth' simply because, after calling him several other names, the horse responded to that one. Thieves and strangers had tried to steal the animals, quickly realizing their error in judgment. The horses lashed out at the robbers, biting and kicking them furiously. He had no idea where the horses had come from but appreciated their loyalty and their company.

"Here," August handed Clay a bowl of broth and a slab of bread. He poured some of the golden, steaming soup into a bowl for himself and hung the small pot back over the glowing coal.

"You had a good idea, Augie. We've spent so much time wandering in the southwest we forgot about any opportunities that might exist elsewhere."

"Maybe Calla did us a favor."

"Perhaps," he admitted then finished the rest of his meal.

Clay leaned back on his blanket, resting his head against his saddle and staring up at the star-encrusted sky. He noticed the moon's pockmarked features had diminished somewhat but it still dominated the heavens. He watched August smother the ember with the remainder of the broth then place the charred lump on top of the overturned pot to dry.

August flopped back onto his blankets, sighing with contentment as his body made contact with the sand. It had been a long day for them both.

"Sleep well, Clay."

"You, too." Clay pulled his cap down over his eyes.

August rested his head in the cradle of his interlaced fingers and looked up into the night. His thoughts went back over the years he had known Clay. The two of them had

been friends their whole lives. They had both been dropped off on a farm just to the east of the Broken Plains as infants. They knew nothing of their families or who had taken them there. The homesteader and his wife, who already had five children of their own, gave them food and shelter. The oldest two, a tall, brown-haired boy covered in freckles named Max and a redheaded girl with big feet named Hally, were very jealous of the two of them. The siblings blamed Clay and August for everything, including their own misdeeds and laziness. Max and Hally plotted the worst offense in their parents' eyes. Hally sneaked into the boys' shared bed and Max 'discovered' the unforgivable transgression. He yelled out and the farmer came running, then hit the boys with a switch as they desperately tried to explain what they could not understand. The man worked them harder than ever afterward, much to the fiendish delight of Max and Hally. August couldn't help but grin, for as much as Max and Hally hated them, they loathed having to work even more. Well, they ended up with their own chores plus they had to share in the ones he and Clay left behind. He and Clay departed the farm when they reached adolescence, seeking their fortunes in the southwestern corner of the land. Clay had discovered Windstorm Harbor and the island; August gravitated toward the desert. That was nearly ten years ago.

August's lids slowly drooped then closed, the events of the past few days stealing away the last of his conscious energy.

The elf brought his arms up too late. He felt his cap being jerked off his head and Essa's impatient hoof pounding the dirt. He opened his eyes and stared at the animal nickering in his face, his hat dangling from her teeth. Clay patted the mare's nose but she would not relinquish his cap until he stood up.

August was already awake and packed, sitting with his elbows resting on his knees grinning broadly at him. "You sleep as long as the rich folks in Windstorm." He handed Clay a cup of tea.

Clay sipped his tea, stretching out the kinks in his muscles as he surveyed the land around him. He liked the way the pre-dawn light bathed the desert with a peculiar pink shade, which reminded him of the salmon-colored shells found along the island's beaches. He had learned the flat shells had sharp edges the natives used as knives and weapons.

Clay drained his cup, shook the droplets out onto the sand, and stashed it in his pack. "How far do you think the city is?"

"I'm not sure." August mounted his horse. "All I know is it lies somewhere south of those mountains."

He pointed toward a white and gray smudge running horizontally in the north.

“What do you think? A two or three week ride?”

“About that, maybe even longer if we stay here and talk about it some more.”

“We’ll cross the Plains and then swing east. With any luck we’ll run into some elves once we cross onto their lands.”

“And with any luck they won’t kill us.”

“That, too.”

They journeyed north along the edge of the desert, their goal the line of spiky mountains running in a southward direction. They prevented the desert from encroaching any further to the east and blocked the lush landscape from penetrating to the west. Both climates met and sometimes clashed beyond the last line of hills. The desert would invade the fertile soil during the dry spells and the grasses and trees would take back what it had won during the rainy seasons. Clay could see the bright green and brown hues pushing toward them even from this distance. The low line of clouds gradually forming in the southwest promised rain, which would soon fall and help the greenery claim a little bit more land from the desert.

The two friends kept an eye out for any unwanted visitors. They had no idea how determined the group from Midtown was in tracking them down and they weren’t about to wait and find out. Man avoided the desolate sands and that suited the two of them just fine. Thunder pealed in the distance, rolling sluggishly across the miles toward them. Storms in these parts were rare but powerful. Those which managed to hold together while crossing the hot and humid expanse from the sea became stronger as they collided with the cooler air at the end of the range. Clay and August urged their horses on, hoping to reach the rugged bluffs before the tempest erupted.

They reached the foothills in the early afternoon, galloping east then north once more, ignoring the plains that stretched away from the eastern face of the range. Scrubby trees and undersized brush grew out of the brick-colored soil, their tenacity equaled only by the tufts of pale yellow grasses sprouting up beside them.

Clay followed August as they rode parallel to the mountains. A cool wind blew in from the west, quickly followed by thick clouds that looked like old piles of dirty wool. They drifted overhead, blotting out the sun and the entire western horizon. The air felt heavy and oppressive, the bolts of lightning flashing dangerously nearby and the thunderclaps reverberating loudly in the riders’ ears. Raindrops the size of their thumbnails began to fall sporadically from the sodden mass overhead. It would be only a matter of time before the skies opened up and drowned them. August pulled on his reins, jumping off Tauth’s back before he came to a complete stop. He led his mount into one of the many clefts in the side of the mountain. Clay scanned the area one last time then dismounted and led his horse in behind him.

August squatted down and dug out a small hollow in the soft ground with his knife then deposited a shiny black lump into it. He lit it, placed a makeshift spit over the glowing ember then handed the empty pot to Clay. The elf placed it on the ground outside the recess, retrieving the full pan a few moments later. A warm mug of tea was what they both needed to chase away the chill in the air. They ate the last of the eggs and slices of ham, the thunder finally abating for a short time.

“We might have to spend the night here and hope that the sun hardens the ground before...Clay? Is something wrong?”

Clay cocked his head to the side straining to hear the peculiar sounds echoing faintly in his ears. He thought he heard faint cries and rocks bouncing down the side of the mountain but nothing crashed to the ground in front of the opening. He shook his head and the ghostly noises disappeared, carried away on a rumbling vibration running through the very core of his being.

“Hmm? No, nothing’s wrong. Just tired, I guess.”

“Well, get some rest. We have a long way to go.”